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ABSTRACT

To investigate the composing processes of professional expository writers, interviews were conducted of six subjects who regularly produced expository prose under the pressure of a weekly or monthly deadline. Subjects included Noel Perrin, essayist, book critic, and Dartmouth College professor; Tom Wicker, political columnist for "The New York Times"; Walter Kerr, drama critic for "The New" magazine; Susan Nykamp, managing editor of "Photo Marketing"; and Neal Gabler, a cohost of the PBS program "Sneak Previews" and film critic for "Monthly Detroit." Each interview was recorded on cassette and conducted according to a previously prepared set of questions. In addition, the notes and drafts of at least two articles were collected. Four conclusions were drawn from the evidence and documentation: (1) writers continued to develop their abilities beyond the levels of mere proficiency or competence; (2) writers gained ability through immersion in contexts and increased familiarity with a habitual, predictable task environment; (3) writers' commitment to and proficiency with their subject depended upon the degree of their personal intellectual involvement or commitment to that subject; and (4) standards of quality in writing were flexible in the view of the writer according to exigencies and characteristics of the task environment. (HOD)

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The Composing Processes of Professional Expository Writers

When Janet Emig reviewed the literature on the composing process in 1971, her examples of professional writing were virtually all taken from interviews, letters, journals, and biographies of novelists and poets.[1] While her case study method has since been widely emulated and refined by other researchers who have together generated a substantial body of knowledge about the composing processes of student writers,[2] studies of professional writers have continued to stress creative writing and to emphasize the author's persona or philosophy of writing rather than to investigate his composing process. For example, in its entire history The Paris Review has interviewed some seventy novelists but only one essayist--E.B.White.[3] The University of South Carolina's Writer's Workshop television series, which includes four expository writers among its fifteen interviewees, focuses more on their working methods or their attitudes about writing than on their processes.[4]

Moreover, both the research on professional writers and the anthologies published for composition courses emphasize works produced under very different conditions than students produce theirs. Products are the results of specific processes and the composing process of a novelist or poet creating a literary work or an essayist or reporter composing a major article or book--writings generated by time and experience--is different from that of a college freshman trying to produce a three-to-five page thesis-and-support paper in two weeks for his composition class or a ten-page research paper with at least fifteen references and documentation in a month for a subject the student has never been exposed to before.

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These reflections led me to propose investigating the composing processes of professional expository writers by first reading widely in their work and then interviewing them about the composing processes they experienced creating that work. I chose subjects who regularly produced expository prose under the pressure of a weekly or monthly deadline; they wrote for specific publications--on assignment, as it were--and, among them, they varied in experience from two to thirty-two years and in the aims of discourse they produced from expressive to referential and persuasive.[5] My subjects included Noel Perrin, essayist, book critic, and Dartmouth College professor; Tom Wicker, political columnist for The New York Times; Walter Kerr, drama critic for The New York Times; David Denby, film critic for New York Magazine; Susan Nykamp, managing editor of Photo Marketing; and Neal Gabler, co-host of the PBS program Sneak Previews and film critic for Monthly Detroit. Each interview was recorded on cassette and conducted according to a previously prepared set of questions which would investigate elements of the cognitive process writing model designed by Linda Flower and John Hayes--that is, the role of task environment, long-term memory, and writing processes upon the subject's actual composing.[6] The questions also drew upon the subjects' published texts to specifically address characteristics of each individual writer's work, particularly ideas, organization, and choice of plans and language. Finally, I collected from the subjects all notes and drafts of at least two articles for comparison with remarks in the interview about general procedures and specific instances of composition.

By and large the testimony of the subjects and the evidence of their composing verified the reliability of the cognitive process model as a description of writing. With the exception of the essayist, who had greater freedom and flexibility on his options about what to write and where to publish it, the subjects each had a specific sense of the rhetorical problem and could explain what was expected

of them by editors and readers, usually expressed in terms of the limitations placed upon their assignments. For example, the nature of Tom Wicker's column, "In the Nation", prevents him from discussing international or local affairs except as they illuminate or impinge upon national affairs.[7] Walter Kerr specifically does not write reviews for his Sunday column; instead he writes more reflective pieces on specific plays or issues or currents in theater and leaves reviewing to weekday writers.[8]

Although the nature of his writing allowed the essayist more variability, the subjects all had a well-defined sense of their topics. Their composing was topic-oriented in varying degrees, the critics generally being more oriented toward their subjects than toward their readers. Most were hard-pressed to describe a typical reader for their columns, although they all had a general sense of who reads the publications they write for. For example, David Denby is well-aware that the average reader of New York Magazine is likely to be college-educated, comfortable or affluent, working, and probably white, someone who can afford the merchandize advertised in the magazine and likely to utilize its advice on cuisine, culture, and entertainment.[9] But only Susan Nykamp, writing for a house publication of the Photo Marketing Association International and viewing her assignment as writing articles to help photo dealers be more profitable, could be so specific as to say that her writing had to be straightforward, casual, and informative for readers who seek information, not entertaining reading.[10]

The interviews and documentary evidence show very specific reliance upon long term memory for both knowledge of the topic and knowledge of writing plans. For example, Noel Perrin's essays, collected in his books, First Personal Rural and Second Person Rural, and written over a period of years as columns and articles for Vermont Life, Boston, and other publications, drew upon twenty years

of experience living and farming in New England. Most subjects distinguished between different approaches to different kinds of writing tasks; in fact, most have written or regularly write in more than one format, as Wicker writes his newspaper columns and novels or Gabler currently writes his monthly article and his weekly television copy and has recently written a book-length study of Jews in Hollywood and a screenplay.

As for the writing processes element of the cognitive process model of writing, both the interviews and the texts give evidence of planning, transcribing, revising, and monitoring as well as of the embedding of these processes in one another. Moreover, the evidence supports a view of all elements of the model as interactive, flowing into one another when necessary rather than following clearly defined stages in linear order. In the process of David Denby's writing, for example, one can trace the development of the piece from initial ideas in notes on an observed experience through to published text and observe the ways in which the planning influenced the transcribing, the rhetorical problem influenced the planning, and so on through the various connections of the documentary evidence.

In addition to general verification of the cognitive process model, the evidence of my study draws attention to specific aspects of the composing processes of professional expository writers involving the task environment, its relationship to development of writing plans in long term memory, and the development of heuristic methods in context.

While all subjects were aware of the dimensions of the rhetorical problem--that is, topic, audience, and the exigencies of the assignment--their approach to the rhetorical problem varied according to the role they defined for themselves as writers and the place of the individual assignment in a larger context of assignments. Thus, writers would select topics and formats for articles according

to considerations of topics and kinds of articles they had been writing recently or intended to write in the future. For example, Neal Gabler would try to avoid doing the same kind of article two months in a row and instead vary them, focusing in random order on an actor's career, a film genre, a specific movie, a trend in recent cinema, or an aspect of film theory.[11] Tom Wicker might write about criminal justice, campaign tactics, the nuclear freeze movement, the environment, and education one after another. They might also weigh necessity against preference, as David Denby chooses between a major film that can't be overlooked and a minor film about which he has ideas he wants to convey.

The degree of personal choice varies in each case according to the assignment. Noel Perrin, writing about life in New England, has a wider range of personal options than Susan Nykamp, writing about current events in photo marketing for retailers. But the subjects all make decisions about their work based on personal involvement with their field or their subject. Often this personal motive supercedes aesthetic or rhetorical considerations. Perrin, for example, once added a sentence to an article of his knowing that it didn't necessarily pertain to the subject but feeling that he wanted to record that information about himself in a public place where one possible reader might discover it.[12] On the other hand, Tom Wicker can point to a piece where he elected to blend together disparate elements because one of them gave him a mood he wanted to create in spite of its questionable relationship to the other elements and the political point of the article and also in spite of the weakening effect it had on the article's unity.

This personal involvement can also mean seeing the writing task chiefly as satisfying the writer's curiosity and taste. Although all the subjects clearly

are aware of a generalized reader throughout the process, the assertion of self-motivation crops up repeatedly. Both Wicker and Gabler say specifically, "I write to please myself."

The pleasing of self isn't merely stylistic or organizational, although it suggests that a writer is the ultimate judge of the success of the piece, at least at the stage where it is sent to publication. Pleasing of slef also occurs in the discovery process. David Denby says that his intensity of feeling about a film determines what he wants to write, and Neal Gabler describes criticism for him "as a way of giving something back to the movie." Walter Kerr says that because he has more choice about what he writes for Sunday he ought to write about what's important to him. Tom Wicker says, "If the subject interests me, then I figure it's well worth writing about."

The variations of approaches to the rhetorical problem help determine the heuristic methods the authors choose. For the essayist Noel Perrin the method is chiefly inspiration, memory, and observation; he once wrote a piece about the sex life of farm animals on napkins in a Pizza Hut waiting for his daughter and her friends to finish listening to a jukebox because the idea was placed in his head by conversation and the details of the incident were fresh in his mind. For Tom Wicker, the political columnist, the method is usually paying attention to the currents of politics and responding to the connections that events and ideas make with his memory of past ideas and events, like a response to a statement about American foreign policy by an Israeli cabinet minister or an article on new statistics about nuclear arms capabilities. For Susan Nykamp the heuristic is research on a topic she and her publisher and the currents of her industry have decided the readership ought to know more about; her knowledge of her field generates the questions she asks to get the right information from

the right people about such a topic as mini-labs and their impact on photo-finishing among retailers or the video market and its place in retail photo outlets. For the critics, it is usually an attempt to reconstruct the experience of the event from notes which trigger precise reminiscences of the performance witnessed. In every class these heuristic methods are part of a continually operating idea generation process, necessitated by the fact that the subjects constantly have to be writing.

The heuristic methods are not only specific to the kind of task assigned to each individual writer and determined by all the aspects of the "task environment" but they are also methods or strategies developed individually and specifically over time, as part of the writer's further development. Every writer I interviewed expressed some sense of development within his or her professional experience, and indicated that this development was significant. Susan Nykamp, the youngest subject, had spent only two years in photo marketing as her first job after college, and explained to me the difficulty of having to write well about a subject on which she had only immediate information, not long term experience or context. The older, more experienced writers also had a sense of having progressed from form or format-bound material to writing which grew out of their command of their subject rather than imposed form on an unknown subject at random. In effect the writer's development in regard to the rhetorical problem contributes to his command of writing plans in long term memory.

I will of course continue to refine and analyze the data which these subjects have provided me, looking at their work and the transcripts of their interviews in more detail. But tentatively I can draw some conclusions from the implications of the material examined so far.

First, writers continue to develop their abilities beyond the levels of mere proficiency or competence as it is necessary for them to develop it, a point Anne Gere has also made elsewhere.[13] My subjects all were experienced writers at the college level and all have continued to develop their abilities and hone their strategies over time.

Second, in concert with this development over time, writers gain ability through immersion in contexts and increased familiarity with an habitual, predictable task environment. This ability involves both the facility to manipulate concepts with greater dexterity and the facility to streamline and regularize heuristic procedures and writing plans. In effect this reduces the load on short term memory by making lower-level skills automatic or semi-automatic.

Third, writers' committment to and proficiency with their subject depends upon the degree of their personal intellectual involvement or committment to that subject. Among professional writers the difference between doing a job which is professional but only servicable and a job which is both professional and personally rewarding depends upon the degree to which it expresses the personal concerns of the author.

Fourth, standards of quality in writing are flexible in the view of the writer according to exigencies of the task environment, including time alloted to the task and remuneration for completion of the task; the writer's perception of the task's significance to him or to his readers; and the degree of the author's personal involvement with elements in the individual piece.

There is clearly a gulf of experience and expertise between a beginning student writer in a Freshman composition course and a regularly published professional expository writer, but the differences between them may be instructive when we consider the demands and expectations we have for our students and the opportunities we provide them in our textbooks, curricula, and classrooms. I

Footnotes

1. Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana,IL: NCTE, 1971), 7-12.

2. Specifically Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers," CCC, 27:2 (May 1976), 160-164; Donald H. Graves, "An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven-Year-Old Children," RTE, 9(Winter 1975), 227-241; Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," RTE, 13(December 1979), 317-336; Sharon Pianko, "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers," RTE, 13 (February 1979), 5-22; Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," CCC,31:4 (December 1980), 378-388.

3. George A. Plimpton and Frank H. Crowther, Interview, "The Art of the Essay I: E . B. White," The Paris Review, 12:48 (Fall, 1969), 65-88.

4. Writer's Workshop: Transcripts (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina/ South Carolina Educational Television Network, 1982).

5. The terms are from James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (1971; repr. NY: W.W. Norton, 1980), 48-67, but see also: Richard Lloyd-Jones, "Primary Trait Scoring," Evaluating Writing, ed. Charles L. Cooper & Lee Odell (Urbana,IL: NCTE, 1977), 33-66, and Robert L. Root, Jr., "Humpty, Alice, and the Composition Prism: A Perspective on Teaching Process," Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, ed. Ian Pringle and Aviva Freedman (Conway, Ark.: CCTE/L & S Books, 1980),105-112.

6. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," CCC, 32:4 (December 1981), 365-387.

7. Personal Interview with Tom Wicker, 8 Oct. 1982.

8. Personal Interview with Walter Kerr, 11 Oct. 1982.

9. Personal Interview with David Denby, 14 Oct. 1982.

10. Personal Interview with Susan Nykamp, 15 Dec. 1982.

11. Personal Interview with Neal Gabler, 23 Dec. 1982.

12. Personal Interview with Noel Perrin, 13 Oct. 1982.

13. See also: Ann Ruggles Gere, "Is There Development After High School?" Cases In Point: The Development of Writing Abilities in School and College, NCTE Convention Speech, NCTE Cassette 70803R, 1978.